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ABSTRACT

Louise Rosenblatt's reader response theory can be applied effectively to film study in the classroom. Although there are differences between film and literature, the processes that one uses to make sense of literature and film are similar, and Rosenblatt's theory provides not only a valuable addition to film theory, but teachers of film study will also find it a useful approach within the classroom. Other approaches, although valid and useful, do not focus much attention on the importance of the viewer experience. They neglect the viewer's contribution, especially what happens cognitively when a viewer encounters a film and how the viewer uses the viewing experience to make meaning. Still, a combination of approaches, rather than a reliance on one approach, will be more useful. Several teaching methods can be used with the viewer response theory, such as using journals, class viewing of films/videos, immediate response papers, lengthy response papers, small group study, and conferences. The viewer response approach can result in richer, more meaningful film viewing experiences for both teachers and students and provide the basis for further, more involved film study. (Forty-two references are appended.) (MS)

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Teaching Film Studies: The Viewer Response Approach

by

Lynn Kear

INTRODUCTION

The study of film analysis and appreciation has grown both within courses in the English curriculum and in the number of courses and programs devoted solely to film study. Not only have some teachers begun to believe that film study may be a helpful supplement to teaching literature, composition, or other topics traditionally related to the English curriculum (Wolfe, 1979; Costanzo, 1986; Cox, 1985; Brown, 1983; Aycock, 1986; Peavler, 1980), but many in various disciplines now view film study as a discipline worthy of study based upon its own merits (Stewart, 1966; Amelio, 1969, 1971; Selby, 1978; Grant, 1983; Nadaner, 1983).

This paper will explore an often neglected component in the teaching of film study, the viewer, and an argument will be made that Louise Rosenblatt's reader response theory can be readily applied to film study in the classroom. Although there are differences between film and literature, the processes that one uses to make sense of literature and film are similar, and Rosenblatt's theory provides not only a valuable addition to film theory, but teachers of film study will also find it a useful approach within the classroom.

BACKGROUND

A variety of approaches have been used in teaching film analysis and appreciation. Perhaps the most popular of these approaches include: (1)

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chronological or historical, (2) auteur, (3) genre, (4) sociological, (5) the relationship of literature to film, and (6) film technique. A chronological or historical approach to film includes content that focuses on the early technical innovations, filmmakers, and film industries of the 19th century and proceeds to contemporary filmmaking (Mast, 1981; Cook, 1981). Various significant events in film history, such as individual achievements and technological advances are highlighted.

The auteur (the French word for author) theory assumes the film has an author or creator much like a book does; in most cases, the author is perceived to be the director of the film, but the author might also be the screenwriter, cinematographer, or some other individual principally involved in the creation of the film (Sarris, 1968; Bazin, 1967; Chown, 1986). Consequently, the emphasis is often on the works of the great directors, such as John Ford, Orson Welles, and Serge Eisenstein; this approach is similar to the approach used in literature courses that focus on the works of great authors, such as Dickens, Faulkner, and Proust.

The genre approach categorizes films that have similar styles or elements such as the western, the detective story, and the comedy (Kaminsky, 1974; Solomon, 1976). These genres have unique conventions that are recognized and used when creating individual films. Using this approach, one attempts, among other things, to discover whether a particular work belongs to a particular genre and whether it is successful within that genre.

The sociological approach often looks at such things as how films reflect society and how films change society (Sklar, 1975; Jowett, 1976). This approach looks at the effects of film on both the individual viewer

and on mass audiences. Among the questions considered in this approach are: what are the purposes of film, what are the positive and negative effects and uses of film, and what is the relationship of film to society?

The approach concerned with the relationship of film to literature attempts to compare the two media in terms of their structure and use of language (Bluestone, 1957; Scholes, 1979). Often this approach is particularly interested in comparing a work that is created in one medium, such as a novel or play, to a filmed adaptation of the work.

The approach that focuses on film technique is concerned with those techniques that are integral to filmmaking and make film unique (Bobker, 1979; Dick, 1978). This approach analyzes the functions and uses of shots, scenes, sequences, cuts, sound, and other elements of film.

All of these approaches are valid, and one would hope that a teacher of film study would use several of these approaches. However, it is important to point out that none of these approaches focuses much attention on the importance of the viewer experience. These approaches, to a greater or lesser degree, assume the importance of various components of film study as paths to understanding film, such as the particular elements and steps involved in making the film and the creative contributions of filmmakers. But they neglect the viewer's contribution, especially what cognitively happens when a viewer encounters a film and how the viewer uses the viewing experience to make meaning.

Nadaner (1984) believes the importance of viewer cognition needs to be acknowledged in teaching: "It has been the tradition of psychologists concerned with film to treat film in an atomistic, reductive manner, dismantling the medium into pictorial quality, zoom shots, shot length,

and readability of commentary....a shifting of focus away from the main concern, how people make sense from films" (p. 121). Questioning how students make sense from film and being aware of the implications for teaching film study that will result from the answers to these questions can make the classroom study of film not only more enjoyable but a more productive learning experience for both teacher and student.

READER RESPONSE THEORY

Theorists exploring reader response to literature, including Louise Rosenblatt (1978), believe that the reader and the text are important, integral aspects involved in the creation of meaning from literature (Holland, 1975; Purves, 1981). These theorists, then, share the assumption that "creating meaning from a literary text is a complex process involving both the reader and the text" (Galda, 1983, p. 1).

Rosenblatt's transactional theory of literature has enjoyed popularity among those involved in teaching literature, though it is relatively unknown among those in the disciplines of communication studies and film study. Rosenblatt formulated her theory by first considering what happens when a reader encounters a text. She was interested in how readers make sense of text and the transactional relationship between reader, text, and meaning.

According to Rosenblatt, transaction is "an ongoing process in which the elements or factors are, one might say, aspects of a total situation, each conditioned by and conditioning the other" (p. 17). Therefore, she views the reader, the text, and the "poem" as a total situation, rather than as discrete elements.

The poem can be described as an aesthetic response resulting from the transaction between reader and text and represents what the reader creates with the text: "... the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 25).

Readers come to a text not as passive recipients but as active readers who bring to the text unique backgrounds, personalities, interests, and approaches with which to discover meaning: "The reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he marshals his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which he sees as the poem" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 12). The meaning of the text is the meaning discovered by the reader. This is not to say that any meaning is acceptable; it is to say, however, that any meaning that can be supported by reference to the text is acceptable.

The text, Rosenblatt argues, has no meaning until a reader encounters it. Meaning results from what occurs between a text and a reader: "... once the creative activity of author has ended, what remains for others -- for even the author himself -- is a text. To again bring a poem into being requires always a reader, if only the author himself" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 15). Rosenblatt likens the text to a musical score in that it is not realized until something happens between it and a performer. The role of the text, then, is to help create an aesthetic experience for the reader (Rosenblatt would call this the poem) when the reader encounters the text; the text, then, is the "stimulus to the creativity of the reader" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 88).

A key idea in Rosenblatt's theory concerns how the reader creates meaning from a text through a process of selective attention. From the verbal symbols in the text, the reader chooses or selects out "... what can be woven into the relevent structure of idea, feeling, and attitude" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 43). The reader, then, creatively uses his or her own resources, to help create the poem.

> A two-way, or better, a circular, process can be postulated, in which the reader responds to the verbal stimuli offered by the text, but at the same time he must draw selectively on the resources of his own fund of experience and sensibility to provide and organize the substance of his response. Out of this the new experience, the literary work, is formed (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 43).

The reader does something with the text. The text is neither simply absorbed by the reader nor is it poured into the reader as if the reader were an empty vessel. The poem cannot be brought into existence without the resources the reader brings to his or her encounter with the text.

VIEWER RESPONSE THEORY

There are, of course, differences between written literature and film. In general, it can be stated that written literature allows one the opportunity to reread certain passages, to read at one's leisure, and to stop and reflect upon passages before continuing with the text. Film, however, tells its story at its own pace; the viewer is not allowed to stop and start the text.[1]

[1] It must be noted, however, that new technology, especially in video recorder/players, is gradually moving closer to this ability by providing the viewer the opportunity to pause, rewind and review, in addition to using slow motion, and fast forward options.

However, it can be argued that film is a form of literature. Probst (1984) states that "The typical movie or television show ... is clearly dramatic fiction....it works as both fiction and drama work. It evokes responses from viewers...." (p. 163). In addition, one cannot deny that viewers come to a film with unique memories, personalities, and ideas about film and films. These are activated during the viewing. Although it is true that the process of reading and viewing are not exactly the same, it is also true that the viewer, like the reader, selects, sorts, and chooses what he or she wishes to focus on throughout the viewing experience. This process represents the student's effort to reach meaning.

Literature teachers who are already using Rosenblatt's reader response theory in their classes may wish to use films to further bring out aesthetic responses in their students. There is evidence that a visual presentation, such as a film, evokes a more emotional response from students, while reading a text provides for greater attention to details: "A combination of written and video texts insures the recall of detail and the emotional involvement and interests that most teachers wish to see in their students" (Bell-Metereau, 1983, p. 497). Film study within the literature classroom appears to be a valuable supplement for those teachers hoping for a greater involvement with the work from their students.

For those who teach film study it is important to realize that in addition to the film and the filmmaker, there is another component involved in a work of film: the viewer. Using those things that the viewer brings to a film study class is just as important as using

information concerning the film, the filmmaker, and the context in which the film is created. The viewer's experience is integral to his or her understanding of film, and the teacher of film studies needs to consider how to effectively tap into that experience.

IMPLICATIONS OF USING VIEWER RESPONSE THEORY

Teachers of film study courses will need to acknowledge not only the validity of the students' responses to film but also the validity of using viewer response as a teaching approach. This may require re-evaluating some previously held assumptions concerning knowledge and the learning process. Teachers must resist the temptation to attempt to pour knowledge via course content into their students and focus, instead, on how the course content and what is occurring within their students can both be utilized in the teaching situation.

It is also essential that teachers respect students' interpretations, even if they do not always agree with them. The meaning of any film belongs to the student; meaning cannot be given to the student from the teacher or any other authority. Furthermore, it is essential for those using this approach to be willing to learn from their students; it is assumed in this approach that the teacher is a learner along with the students.

VIEWER RESPONSE THEORY IN PRACTICE

Once a teacher decides film study is an important area of inquiry for students, the next step will be to determine what objectives or goals are desired through the study and analysis of film. It will be important to

remember that a variety of approaches for teaching film study, including that of viewer response, have the potential to provide for greater learning experiences for the student and the teacher; a combination of approaches, rather than a reliance on one approach, may be more useful.

Greiner (1979) suggests that the goal of a film study course should neither be just what the viewer got out of a film nor should it just be a mastery of content concerning film; instead, the goal of a film study course should be to incorporate both: "At the conclusion of the course, the kids should be able to state how a particular scene made them feel and/or that it made them think, and how such things as composition, illumination, color, size, angle, distance, motion, point of view, lenses, and editing influenced their emotional and intellectual responses" (p. 37). The meaning derived from the film will have originated with the students, with what they brought to the film, and with their experiences with the film.

Another teacher who has considered reader response theory in teaching film courses, Terry Peavler (1983), also discusses the application of reader response theory in film and literature courses:

> ... reader response theory is especially fruitful, for our ultimate question is seldom "what is happening?", but, if I may paraphrase John Ciardi, "how is it happening?", and, more specifically, "how did the artist make me feel that way?".... Students ... will become far more keenly aware of the inherent natures, the limitations and the possibilities, of both film and literature. Moreover, they will gain a greater appreciation of the hows and the whys of narrative, of structure, and of aesthetic communication (p. 87).

Probst (1984) suggests three significant learning objectives for students: "First, they might analyze their own habits and patterns.... Second, they might learn that watching film and television can be much like reading a literary work; they can respond to and think about the

visual just as they would the written. Third, they may learn something about the technical elements of visual literature and their differences from techniques of written literature" (Probst, 1984, p. 165). From the responses generated by these kinds of concerns, the students can then begin to look more closely at film and consider the question of how responses from film are achieved.

TEACHING METHODS

Journals

Journals can be used by students to record responses, provide a log of viewing habits, ask questions (of the teacher or even of the collective unconscious), and show the evolution of students' thoughts on film. Periodically, the journals can be collected by the teacher, and comments written to the student will provide a dialogue between student and teacher that may be missing in large classes.

Since many of the students will, of course, be attending and viewing the same films, there may be similarities in the journals. For example, it will not be too suprising if most students will see the most current, most heavily publicized films. The teacher may want to read aloud some of the entries. In this way, the class will be able to react to the responses of other students.

Class viewing of films/videos

Because of frequent movie attendance on the part of students and the availability of videocassettes, it may not be necessary to use class time for viewing. However, through in-class viewing of films and videos, the students will be able to immediately respond to a work. If it is possible

to use class time for viewing purposes, there are some exercises that might be valuable to the students' involvement with film.

Immediate Response Papers

After viewing a film in class, the students may be asked to immediately respond in writing. These responses can be collected by the teacher and read aloud in order to generate discussion. This may be particularly useful in situations where the film is controversial and the students may be initially reluctant to discuss the work and its issues. A variation on this would be for the teacher to quickly scan over the written papers, determine specific categories of responses, and set an agenda for the discussion.

Lengthy Response Papers

It might also be useful for the student to expand on his/her immediate response. This initial response can serve as the germ of an idea and allow the student to actively observe the growth and evolution from initial response to polished written prose.

Small group study

Dividing the class into smaller groups or pairs may be particularly appropriate for instruction using the viewer response approach. After viewing a film, the students could be assigned to a group or given a partner with whom they would discuss their responses to the work. Often a series of guided questions might be useful. For example, Robert Probst (no date) and Suzanne Howell (1977) have designed a series of questions which guide the students to share their responses to a literary work. Sample questions for film study students might include:

What feelings did the film awaken in you? What emotions did you feel as you viewed the film?

What is your first reaction or response to the film? What did you see happening in the film? Paraphrase it -- retell the events briefly.

What memories does the film call to mind--of people, places, events, sights, smells, or even of something more ambiguous, perhaps feelings or attitudes?

What idea or thought was suggested by the film? Explain it briefly.

What is the most important scene in the film? The most important shot?

Who do you think is the creator of the work? What sort of person do you imagine the creator to be?

Did you feel involved with the film or distant from it?

How did your reading of the film differ from that of your partner? In what ways were they similar? How did your understanding of the film or your feelings about it change as you and your partner talked?

Do you think the film is a good one -- why, or why not?

Does the film call to mind any other literary work? If it does, what is the connection you see between the two?

If you were to be asked to write about your reading of this film, upon what would you focus? Would you write about some association or memory, some aspect of the film itself, about the author, or about some other matter?

Probst (no date) has included these kinds of questions in a booklet intended to guide the students. This may be particularly useful for students and teachers who are not familiar with using a response-based approach in the classroom. A mixture of this kind of constrained response and free response by the students may be more valuable than an emphasis on one type of response. The free response is particularly valuable because "it identifies the student's most vivid connection with the text....The

constrained response is the result of the encounter of three forces--the reader, the text, and the assignment; that third variable might interfere with the interaction of the first two...." (Probst, 1984, p. 46). Experimentation by the teacher will help yield the proper mixture.

It has been suggested that work done in pairs can be expanded to larger groups of say, four or more, then finally expanded to include the class as a whole: "Discussion first in pairs and then in slightly larger groups serves a purpose like that of the brief writing period following the reading -- it allows ideas to germinate and grow vigorous enough that they cannot be ignored" (Probst, 1984, p. 45). The emphasis on the evolution of thoughts is an important aspect of the viewer response approach.

Conferences

Conferences between student and teacher may serve several important purposes in a viewer response-based class. Although conferences may not always be possible in a large class, such conferences would not only provide some means to evaluate the student, the conference might also serve to give the student a sense of shared purpose, that is, an acknowledgement that the student and teacher are both attempting to reach understanding of the works being studied as well as an understanding of themselves. Furthermore, another purpose of the conference is to "model in miniature the kinds of exchanges hoped for in the full class. First of all, the talk is cooperative, rather than competive; the point is to understand, not to win arguments" (Probst, 1984, p. 50).

These teaching suggestions in no way cover all the different areas of inquiry and approaches a teacher might use. Many of these suggestions have been generated by those working in the area of written literature. Hopefully, as more teachers consider viewer response theory as appropriate for the classroom study of film, more diverse and thoughtful teaching suggestions will result.

CHOOSING FILMS

Generally, any film the student wishes to view should be acceptable. Within the constraints of acceptability of those to whom the teacher is accountable, the maturity of students, and the availabilty of works, the films and videos that might be considered for viewing is wide open.

Most contemporary films, especially those distributed by the major Hollywood studios, almost certainly target young people as their audience. It may be particularly appropriate to emphasize these kinds of films in order to encourage students to view less passively. It would not be inappropriate, then, to assign such films as those directed by John Hughes (16 Candles, Pretty In Pink, Breakfast Club) or any other film that would particularly appeal to the age group of the classroom.

There is a canon of films that are considered to be classics of the medium. The list of such titles might include Citizen Kane, The Searchers, Potemkin, and It's A Wonderful Life. It would certainly be appropriate to include such films in a film study class, but it should not be expected and assumed that students will also find the films sublime and extraordinary. It may be that the student is not yet mature enough to handle the film in a way that will lead to any kind of meaningful

response. It may also be that the film, regardless of how many critics praise it, simply does not reach a particular student. As mentioned before, individual differences need to be respected. If "great" or "classic" films are viewed, it will be important to remember that "great" and "classic" are subjective, value-laden terms.

Because of the constraints of classroom time, it might also be useful to use shorter films in the class. There are many excellent short films that can be viewed within a 50 minute period. Several books, some published annually, provide content and ordering information for a large variety of films (Cowie, 1986; Maltin, 1983; Limbacher, 1982; The Video Source Book, 1986).

EVALUATION

The issue of evaluation presents some particular problems for the teacher who is using viewer response in the classroom. There appears to be a tendency on the part of many teachers to prefer evaluation methods that assume a student's response is "right" or "wrong". However, as Howell (1977) explains, this is not possible in response-oriented instruction: "While it is clear that some responses will show more sensitivity than others, to disparage any response is to create an unfavorable climate for the kind of interchange we want to achieve....Something ... has triggered each response, and in the process of finding out what it is, the student can learn a great deal" (p. 40).

Probst (1984) suggests that evaluation must respect the students' responses and analyses in such a way that growth, not "correctness", is valued. Furthermore, the emphasis should be more on the student's

evaluation of his/her interaction with the work and the responses of others than on the work viewed. Consequently, instead of asking such questions as "Who directed Citizen Kane?" or "What is the theme of The Searchers?", questions that are less fact-oriented might be more valuable in evaluating students. Probst (1984) suggests the following type of questions for evaluating students using response-based instruction:

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1. Did you enjoy ... the work? Can you identify why you did or did not?

2. Did the ... work offer any new insight of point of view? If so, did it lead you to a change in your own thinking? If not, did it confirm thoughts or opinions you already held?

3. Did the discussion reveal anything about the work, about your classmates, or about yourself? (Probst, 1984, p. 217).

GRADE LEVEL -- FOR WHOM IS THIS APPROACH APPROPRIATE?

It is natural for students, for human beings, to respond to films, to put it in the context of past experiences including past viewings, personal values, and personal preferences. This is how most people process a particular experience, whether it is reading literature, viewing film or television, or listening to a recording. This would seem to occur at any age. Therefore, it seems valid to suggest that the viewer response approach can be appropriate for any age or grade level. However, it seems particularly appropriate for high school students and college students enrolled in introductory film courses.

Once students begin to respond to films, their interest may turn to other aspects of film. For example, a student may view Apocolypse Now, be intrigued enough to view other Coppola films, and proceed to become intrigued with such issues as auteurism, the economic structure of the

film industry, and/or innovative film techniques such as the use of high technology video. These kinds of interests will naturally grow out of responding to film. It does not seem necessary to teach all students in all film classes the essentials of film technique, history, and so on; it seems more appropriate to let students naturally progress to the point where they will be ready to -- and want to discover these aspects of film. The following analogy illustrates this point: Students are naturally attracted to a crystal; once they pick it up, because of their natural attraction, they then begin to look more closely at it. They become interested in its details, in how it is put together, in how it functions, and so on. Deeper, more meaningful questions form as a result of their natural interest.

AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

An area of research related to viewer response that may be interesting and instructive to pursue is an experimental investigation into film viewing similar to what Rosenblatt (1978) and others (Blake and Lunn, 1986; Kintgen, 1983) have attempted in text reading. Just as these researchers attempted to discover what happens when a reader encounters text, other researchers may wish to conduct an experiment in which a viewer encounters a film and is asked to write down or speak into a tape recorder his or her thought processes. This kind of investigation will help provide more concrete evidence of what actually occurs during the viewing experience.

Further research also needs to be done on the effect of audience on the viewer experience. The audience with whom one views a film seems to

have the potential to affect the aesthetic experience of an individual viewer. Viewing a film may provide for quite an unusual and memorable experience if a viewer is not, for instance, in agreement with an audience; the viewer may not be laughing when the audience laughs or not connecting emotionally to the film when the rest of the audience apparently is connecting to the film. While reading is usually a private experience, viewing is often a public experience. Let us determine how public and private experiences in viewing differ and investigate if such things as peer pressure effect a viewing.

It may also be instructive to determine if there is a qualitative difference between viewer experience with film in a dark theater on a large screen and viewer experience with a VCR, either alone in one's home or with a group of friends. It will be interesting to determine if the viewing experience is affected by such factors as environment and technology.

Perhaps an appropriate next step is to determine which films students are viewing, both in movie theatres and on VCRs, and use this information to reach them. Just as reader interest surveys have been used to plan literature curriculum, viewer interest surveys can be used to plan the film study curriculum. It will not be difficult to get students interested in viewing films, especially popular ones, and once they are interested in viewing, the next step will be to have the students look more closely at film, their responses to it, in addition to other aspects of film and film viewing.

CONCLUSION

Any of the teaching approaches traditionally used in film study can incorporate the viewer response approach: "The essential feature of response-based literature is that it makes every effort to ensure that students discover their own routes into the literature" (Probst, 1984, p. 46). The approaches mentioned in the first part of this paper (and certainly others not mentioned) will still have a place within film study, but the teacher may wish to begin with the viewer response approach. This approach may result in richer, more meaningful film viewing experiences for both teacher and students and provide the basis for further, more involved film study.

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